



# EVIDENCE MEETS PRACTICE

*Institutional Strategies to  
Increase College Completion*





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Increase College Completion*

**U.S. Department of Education**

Office of Postsecondary Education

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November 2012

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# Introduction

This *Evidence Meets Practice* guide is a summary of the lessons learned at the Evidence-Action-Innovation College Completion Symposium convened by the U.S. Department of Education on Jan. 30, 2012. These findings emerged from conversations among researchers, postsecondary education practitioners, and policy experts. The institutional examples cited were either the focus of the research or mentioned during the round table discussions and/or large group report outs.

## **The National Imperative—Meeting the 2020 Goal**

In February 2009, in an address to a joint session of Congress, President Obama posed a vision for the United States that has caught national attention and momentum: “By 2020, America will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world.” According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) most recent data on the percentage of 25–34 year olds who have an associate degree or higher, the U.S. is number 14 among the 37 nations represented, at 42 percent (OECD, 2012). To achieve the president’s 2020 goal, the nation needs 10 million additional college graduates from community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities. If current trends continue, there will be 2 million more graduates by 2020—8 million short of our goal. This is an aggressive mandate for postsecondary education in the midst of deep and pervasive challenges. It is the role of institutions, states, the federal government, and all postsecondary education stakeholders to address the challenges and collaborate to achieve this goal.



It is projected that in 2018, 63 percent of jobs will require some postsecondary education, especially those that are likely to provide a family-sustaining wage (Carnevale et al., 2010). In addition to an economic advantage, research shows that individuals who complete college have wide-ranging benefits, including increased health, greater professional satisfaction, and higher rates of volunteering, voting, and civic participation (Baum et al., 2010). However, the benefits of education extend beyond individual welfare. The nation's democracy needs effective and productive citizens who are globally competent and who can successfully address, with other nations and diverse groups, the complex challenges that will continue in the years ahead. Never before has postsecondary education been as critical to the nation's economic, social, and civic well-being.

### **College Completion Symposium**

Achieving the President's 2020 College Completion Goal is a high priority of the Department of Education. Secretary Arne Duncan refers to it as the North Star of the Department's work in postsecondary education. Policies, programs and interagency partnerships are focused on the completion agenda. Secretary Duncan has noted that the education challenges facing the nation, including affordability and college completion, will require a shared responsibility among the federal government, states, and postsecondary institutions. In March 2011, the Department released the *College Completion Tool Kit* for state leaders, which outlined seven strategies for state policymakers to improve college completion rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In September 2012, the *Adult College Completion Tool Kit* was published to connect state administrators and local practitioners to the



*“When I led Chicago public schools, we were trying to significantly increase graduation rates and make sure our graduates were going to college and ultimately completing. As we really started to track the data, it was fascinating to me . . . We had students with almost identical profiles, very similar grades and very similar SAT [and] ACT scores, having radically different outcomes with our local universities. Not like a 5–10 percent difference, but [for students with the] same profile, in one university 75 percent would graduate in five years and [in another university the five-year rate would be] 30 to 35 percent . . . literally doubling the rate of the possibility of graduation. So, something different was going on in the culture around support, around bridge programs, around mentoring that created an environment and a climate of structure that gave people who were absolutely at risk coming in much, much better odds for graduating.”*

**—Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education**

Jan. 30, 2012, Evidence-Action-Innovation Symposium, Washington, D.C.

strategies, resources, and technical assistance tools that promote access, quality, and completion for adult students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). On Jan. 30, 2012, Secretary Duncan addressed the Evidence-Action-Innovation College Completion Symposium, which convened leading researchers, successful practitioners, and policy experts (see list in Appendix 1) for a day of engaged dialogue about what institutions can do to increase college completion. They came with a singular mission: to consider what works and what does not work. Their task was to integrate evidence with practice. Although there are myriad forces that contribute to college completion, the focus of their agenda was on student supports, including bridge programs, learning communities, developmental education, and advising, coaching, and mentoring. The evidence presented by the researchers was vetted in rich roundtable discussions with practitioners, other researchers, and policy experts identifying how practice and research inform each other, resulting in a deeper understanding of what really matters for students. This *Evidence Meets Practice* guide is a summary of the major lessons learned through their interchange.

## Findings

Sustained. Integrated. Systemic. Efforts to promote student success must be integrated and sustained, rather than isolated or short-term. Throughout the symposium, these themes were repeated continually and from different perspectives. Supporting students in achieving their goals requires intentionally implementing strategies and practices in an integrated and sustained way. The overarching message was that sustained and integrated efforts must originate from a systemic approach that ultimately drives the culture itself. Transformative change that has lasting results is rooted in a culture that is focused on student success. The overall underpinning of this guide, therefore, is “Integrating and Sustaining Student Supports.”



Fostering a culture of student success requires the implementation of mutually supporting integrated strategies, such as the four identified at the symposium and discussed in this guide (see diagram below).

Undoubtedly, other strategies will come to mind as thoughtful practitioners and researchers reflect on the issues presented here.



**Framework for Increasing College Completion.** A systemic plan includes several strategies that are integrated and sustained, such as those described in this guide (1–4) or others developed by institutions (5,6, etc.) to support student success on their campuses.

## Evidence Meets Practice

*Evidence Meets Practice* is designed to inform conversations and motivate evidence-based actions on campuses as institutions strive to increase student success and completion.

The pages that follow reflect the overarching theme—integrating and sustaining student supports—and define four key strategies identified at the symposium that demonstrate positive evidence in promoting student success. Each of the four strategies from the symposium is expanded upon throughout this document with examples from the institutions that participated in the symposium. These institutional examples are intended to spark thought and conversation by highlighting successful and promising campus practices. In the diagram above, the first four boxes refer to the strategies identified at the symposium. Sections five and six refer to campus-specific strategies and practices that can be incorporated into a systemic institutional approach.

# Integrating and Sustaining Student Supports

While many student support programs hold promise for increasing student success and completion, the researchers and practitioners at the symposium concluded that the essential key to ensuring long-term impact is that programs must be integrated and sustained.

Good programs have often been designed as individual islands of student support that are not integrated with other resources for students. Short-term programs—even those with evidence of success—often see their long-term impact reduced when they are not followed by consistent interventions and embedded in an institutional culture that is directed toward student success. A coherent and systemic institutional plan to integrate and sustain programs is vital.

Such systemic change requires the participation and ownership of faculty and staff across the institution, as well as leaders whose common vision drives a culture focused on student success. Rarely can an effort to significantly improve success across an organization be initiated by a single unit.

To be truly effective, institutional plans must reach more than a small segment of the student body. Designing an institutional strategy around “boutique” programs that only reach a small number of students may impact their lives and success. However, if these programs are not scaled on an institutional level, there is little potential for increasing completion success for all students.

***Integrated*** – Student supports (e.g., bridge programs, learning communities) should be integrated and mutually reinforcing.

***Sustained*** – One-semester programs are not enough; sustained support should be provided through additional programs and continual interventions.

***Systemic*** – Integrated and sustained supports must be rooted in a systemic plan focused on creating a culture that drives student success.



### **Sustained and Integrated Support for Students**

The Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY) seeks to provide each student an integrated set of supports and a structured degree pathway. All students in the program study full-time in a limited number of majors, receive a consolidated course schedule (i.e., morning or afternoon), and take at least three courses with other ASAP students. They have twice-monthly in-person advising, access to tutoring, career counseling, and other services. Students' fiscal needs are addressed through waiver of any difference between need-based financial aid and tuition and fees, plus free use of textbooks and mass transit passes to commute to school, work, and home.

The success of ASAP does not rest on one or two interventions, but instead results from the collective benefits of bundling student supports in a very intentional way. Supports are integrated with one another, sustained across the students' academic careers, and available to a large number of students.

CUNY ASAP is demonstrating positive results. For the 2007 class, a CUNY study found that the percentage of students who graduated within three years was more than double that of a comparison group of similar students: 55 percent versus 24.7 percent.

When graduation and transfers to four-year colleges are considered together as percent successful outcomes, ASAP still outperforms comparison group students: 63.1 versus 44.4 percent. In a randomized control trial of ASAP that is still in progress, researchers found positive impacts on the number of students who maintained full-time status, credits earned, completion of developmental courses, and retention (Linderman and Kolenovic, 2012; Scrivener et al., 2012).

## Symposium Observations

*“People want a silver bullet, but it takes a lot of integrated changes to have an impact.”*

—Sylvia Hurtado, University of California, Los Angeles

*“We need to move beyond a view of reform based on individual programs. We should be more ambitious about the types of reforms that combine various elements.”*

—Tom Bailey, Columbia University

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

#### The Learning Communities Demonstration

A study of learning communities indicates that successful ones require institutional coordination and support.

<b>Learning Community Traits</b>	Learning communities consist of <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Students enroll in two or more classes together</li><li>• Instructors collaborate on curriculum and in providing student support</li><li>• Course curricula are integrated (e.g. joint syllabi, assignments, etc.)</li><li>• Enhanced academic support and/or counseling is provided</li></ul>
<b>Target Population</b>	First-time community college students who assess into developmental math, English, or reading classes
<b>Where</b>	Community Colleges in Md., Fla., Texas, N.Y., and Calif.
<b>Cost</b>	≈\$500 per student
<b>Outcomes</b>	Students who participated in the Kingsborough Community College (NY) program demonstrated effects six years after entering the program: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Earned more credits</li><li>• Were more likely to persist</li><li>• Were 4.5 percent more likely to graduate</li></ul>

Source: Visher, et al., 2010.



*“Improved completion does not happen by accident. It requires a coherent, structured, and proactive approach that does not leave student success to chance.”*

—Vincent Tinto, Syracuse University

*“We need to move from ‘best practices’ to ‘best processes.’ ”*

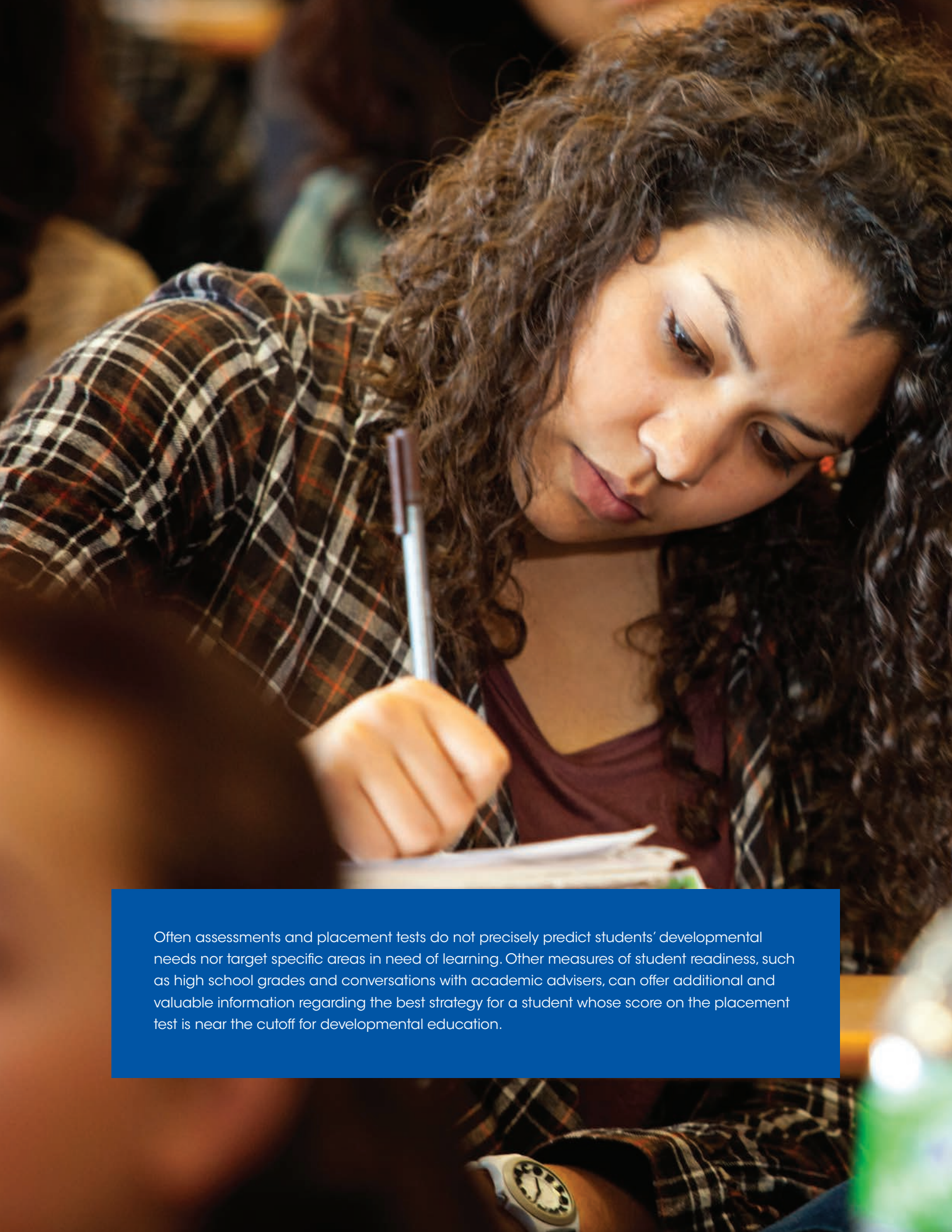
—Vickie Choitz, Center for Law and Social Policy

## **Leadership and Culture**

Change will not happen systemically without the support of campus leaders who are committed to creating an institutional culture that is focused on student success. The president or chancellor has an essential role in creating such a culture. However, he or she cannot do it alone. Campus leaders across the institution must make it clear that student success is everyone’s priority and that all are accountable in their distinctive roles as faculty, staff and administrators.

Students also need to be held accountable for their progress and challenged to meet high expectations for academic achievement. Success cannot be reduced to completion at the cost of academic standards. Leadership has a key role in setting a culture of high expectations that is supported with a quality teaching and learning environment as well as positive incentives that reward innovation and productivity. High expectations along with support and incentives can drive excellence across the campus.

Efforts to improve student success need to be developed in light of each institution’s historical and contemporary mission. Many institutions, including minority-serving, religiously affiliated and women’s colleges, as well as other state and independent colleges and universities, have specific missions and histories. Leaders must assure that strategic efforts are linked and multidimensional—as well as aligned with the institution’s mission and effectively serve its student populations.



Often assessments and placement tests do not precisely predict students' developmental needs nor target specific areas in need of learning. Other measures of student readiness, such as high school grades and conversations with academic advisers, can offer additional and valuable information regarding the best strategy for a student whose score on the placement test is near the cutoff for developmental education.

# Strategy 1: Transform Developmental Education

Many students arrive on campuses underprepared for college-level work. Often they find themselves in developmental courses that have mixed results, especially for students who place near the cutoff points on assessments (see Bailey, 2008). Early college experiences should build confidence in students that they can succeed and that they are “real” college students. Developmental courses can be an impediment, slowing or stopping student progress toward completing their degrees. An integrated and systemic approach to fostering student success requires transforming developmental education, including assessments and placements.

There are different approaches to improving developmental education that colleges are implementing across the nation with evidence of success. One approach is “upward placement” or “mainstreaming,” which moves students directly into college-level courses. This is successful when students receive effective advising and additional integrated supports, e.g., structured tutoring, peer mentoring, or a linked course focused on academic success. Other accelerated approaches compress developmental courses into a shorter amount of time, allowing students to more quickly advance to college courses. For example, at the Community College of Denver, students in the FastStart program take two developmental courses in one semester as part of their full course load, allowing them to move more quickly through the developmental sequence (Bragg, et al., 2010; and Edgecombe, 2011). Some institutions give students more time to complete a developmental sequence. For example, at Guilford Technical College, students who were given two semesters instead of one to complete a math course had higher course completion rates (Zachry & Orr, 2009).

***New Models** – Explore effective models for developmental education, including compression, pairing with college-level courses and upward placement.*

***Assessment** – Encourage students to prepare for placement tests. Target specific skills to be addressed and modularize learning.*

***Self-Efficacy** – Develop in students a sense of self-efficacy to enable them to feel like a “real” college student from day one.*

Pairing college-level courses with developmental courses is another approach. At the Community College of Baltimore County, the Accelerated Learning Program pairs a college-level course and a companion developmental course that are often taught by the same instructor and follow each other in the schedule (Edgecombe, 2011; and Jenkins et al., 2010). Modularization is another way some colleges have sought to improve developmental math education. It breaks course content into smaller segments, allowing students to focus on targeted areas in need of learning (Edgecombe, 2011).



In considering these models, there is no one size fits all for institutions nor for students. Each institution needs to consider which strategies for transforming developmental education are most effective with its students and contribute to an integrated campuswide strategy for advancing student success.

Often assessments and placement tests do not precisely predict students' developmental needs nor target specific areas in need of learning. Other measures of student readiness, such as high school grades and conversations with academic advisers, can offer additional and valuable information regarding the best strategy for a student whose score on the placement test is near the cutoff for developmental education. Students should be informed of the high stakes associated with these tests and encouraged to prepare by focusing on important concepts. Assessments should be targeted and should identify the specific areas needing attention in order to be prepared for college work. For example, if a student is deficient in certain math concepts, he or she can engage in developing skills on fractions and/or quadratic equations, rather than be deterred by a semester-long math course that repeats other information the student already knows (Hughes and Scott-Clayton, 2011).

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

### The Texas Developmental Summer Bridge Study

Bridge programs can help provide structure and support to facilitate college entrance. Course-based programs may be more effective than freestanding programs.

<b>Program Traits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer bridge programs held four to five weeks prior to the start of college</li> <li>• Accelerated instruction in developmental math, English, and/or reading (64–100 hrs.)</li> <li>• Provided academic and student services support (e.g. tutors, labs, etc.)</li> <li>• “College Knowledge” course (including study skills, making goals, and paying for college)</li> <li>• \$400 stipend for completers</li> </ul>
<b>Target Population</b>	Recent high school graduates—84 percent Hispanic, 62 percent female, and 61 percent low-income
<b>Where</b>	Eight open access institutions in Texas (included six community colleges and two four-year schools )
<b>Cost</b>	≈ \$800–\$2,300 per student (varied by intensity and extent of implementation)
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer bridge programs did not have an effect on the likelihood of enrollment</li> <li>• Programs helped students pass college-level math (doubled) and writing (five percent increase)</li> <li>• Programs that were course-based were more effective than freestanding programs</li> </ul>

Source: Wathington, et al., 2011.



## Build Student Self-Efficacy and Meet Needs of Target Populations

Institutions should seek to make all students feel that they belong on campus. At Bellarmine University, the first-year support program for first-generation students is called the Pioneer Scholars Program. College leaders see the positive framing of this program as instrumental to its success. Institutions should seek different ways to build students' sense of themselves as "real" college students as they begin their academic programs.

Programs for students are successful when they address the unique challenges or experiences of certain groups. For example, returning veterans and working adults experience campuses differently than students who are recent high school graduates. Ensuring that veterans, students of color, first-generation students, and others feel as if they belong and are valued by the college is key to their success (<https://www.vetfriendlytoolkit.org>; Perna, 2010).

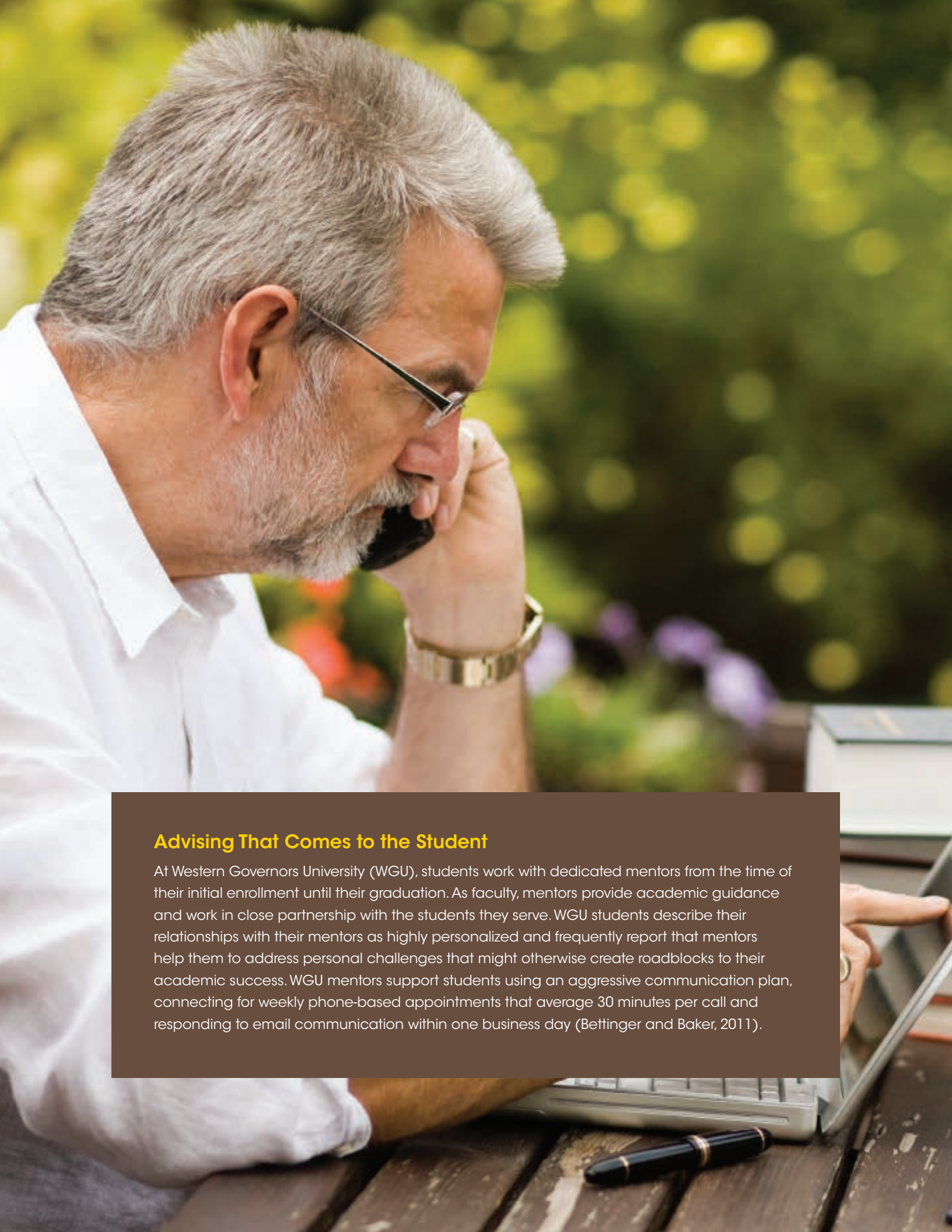
## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

### The Community College Research Center

Evidence points to rethinking developmental education.

<b>Program Traits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Mainstreamed students while providing intensive integrated academic support through a linked course</li><li>• Shortened sequences to allow for upward placement of students who otherwise would have been placed at a lower level</li><li>• Compressed sequence of two developmental education courses into one semester (rather than one developmental course per semester) as part of their full course load</li><li>• Degree of additional supports varied</li></ul>
<b>Target Population</b>	Students one to three levels below college-level math and/or English
<b>Where</b>	Three community colleges in Colo., Md., and N.Y.
<b>Cost</b>	\$250 (mainstreaming), \$0 (upward placement), and \$1000 (compressed course) per student
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Used gatekeeper course (first college-level course) as the measure of success</li><li>• 32 percentage point increase in enrolling and passing English from mainstreaming</li><li>• Upward placement alone improves progression, but may slightly dampen course pass rates</li><li>• 14 percentage point increase in enrolling and passing math from compression</li></ul>

Source: Jaggars, 2012.



### **Advising That Comes to the Student**

At Western Governors University (WGU), students work with dedicated mentors from the time of their initial enrollment until their graduation. As faculty, mentors provide academic guidance and work in close partnership with the students they serve. WGU students describe their relationships with their mentors as highly personalized and frequently report that mentors help them to address personal challenges that might otherwise create roadblocks to their academic success. WGU mentors support students using an aggressive communication plan, connecting for weekly phone-based appointments that average 30 minutes per call and responding to email communication within one business day (Bettinger and Baker, 2011).

# Strategy 2: Bring Advising to the Student

Effective academic advising is critical to student success. It is essential for institutions to explore and assess the most effective model for advising that best supports its students. At many colleges and universities, advising involves one or two meetings per semester, often to approve course registration. Other approaches that dramatically differ from this model are demonstrating positive evidence in promoting student progress and completion.

Some campuses are expanding the advising model that focuses solely on course scheduling, academic requirements, majors and class grades to include coaching and mentoring. Coaching incorporates a student's life situation and goals. Mentoring generally focuses on professional skills and career development. Integrating these supports provides a more holistic view of a student's life reality, thereby, offering support, direction and motivation in meaningful ways.

Advising that is integrated with coaching, where the advisor or coach reaches out to the student proactively on a regular basis by phone, email, text or social media, demonstrates positive student

outcomes. Research suggests that frequent contact with an adviser or coach—in some cases weekly—does improve student progress (Bettinger & Baker, 2011 in box on page 15). There is an increasing recognition that different types of advising may help students at different times.

Tailoring advising strategies to student needs is important to its effectiveness.

Institutions seeking to incorporate a more proactive coaching approach have developed different configurations, including utilizing faculty as both academic adviser and coach or supplementing academic advising with staff coaches, student peer mentors, or professional coaches from outside agencies. Not all faculty are comfortable in a coaching role, although well-versed in curriculum areas. Whether an institution engages

***Proactive*** – Proactively initiate contact with students on a regular basis (more than once or twice a semester).

***Holistic*** – Extend advising to supporting students in their life situations outside the classroom that often impact their academic success.

***Personalized*** – Use technology to implement an advising strategy and plan that is informed by real-time personalized data and monitors each student's individual progress.

faculty, students, or staff in advising and coaching roles, training and development are essential to their effectiveness. No matter the model, the person delivering the service is the essential point of effectiveness. It is also critical that faculty remain engaged in key roles that support students outside as well as within the classroom.

More and more institutions are utilizing technological systems that increase the availability of personalized real-time data, which can provide advisers and coaches with early alerts that offer opportunities to address academic issues in a timely way. Such information also can be utilized to give instant positive feedback to students who are improving or doing well.

Ensuring that advising on a campus matches student needs requires asking, “What should effective advising look like on our campus?” Whatever the approach, institutions must ask who is being served and how best they can be supported within the institutional culture.

## RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

### The Effects of College Coaching

Cost-efficient forms of active advising/coaching show positive results.

<b>Program Traits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trained coaches engage students through structured weekly one-on-one phone meetings, with additional contact via text and email messages</li> <li>• Coaches probe and assess potential obstacles (more than just asking) and develop a plan for success (proactive)</li> <li>• Coaches leverage existing campus resources to help students address problems/challenges</li> <li>• Coaching offered for six to 12 months</li> </ul>
<b>Target Population</b>	13,000 students from eight universities (public, private, for profit) across 17 sites between 2003–04 and 2007–08 academic years
<b>Cost</b>	\$500 per student, per semester; more cost-effective than increased financial aid
<b>Outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coached students’ retention rate 12 percent higher than the control group after 12 months.</li> <li>• impact persisted beyond the six-to-12 month coaching period; the retention rate of coached students was 14 percent higher than non-coached students after 24 months.</li> <li>• Effects on male retention almost 22 percent (twice the size of effects on females).</li> <li>• For the three campuses with available data, graduation rates increased for coached students by 13 percent.</li> </ul>

Source: Bettinger. and Baker, 2011



## Symposium Observation

*“We must pay attention to and document certain elements—bellwethers of student behavior—that may signal problems.”*

—James T. Minor, Southern Education Foundation



### Technology Enabled Advising and Coaching

Technology can enable advisers to access rich information about student progress or difficulties, with early warning systems that send alerts when students trigger certain indicators. These include poor performance on a test, sporadic attendance, or lack of progress on online modules. School faculty and administrators may choose from a variety of software packages or develop such systems in-house to ensure that advisers have the best information to assist students. For example, Brandman University students and administrators use an electronic database system to align and match degree plans with the courses students are taking, which has reduced the number of students accumulating excessive credits, along with the corresponding time and expense that both students and the university accrue from such excess. Additionally, Brandman uses Web-based screen sharing programs as a standard practice for advising online students. These programs allow the student to actively engage with the school systems that track their progress, while having an advisor “virtually” look over their shoulder and guide the discussion.

InsideTrack has been hired by institutions across the country (including Brandman) to provide students with one-on-one coaching by phone, email, and other means to support them in graduating from college prepared for success. InsideTrack coaches work with students to define their long-term goals and develop a plan for achieving them. Their software system helps coaches manage their interactions with students and captures information on the student experience to assist administrators in campus policy and planning. Institutions report that this external provider offers personalized coaching support that increases student success. (Bettinger and Baker, 2011).

A photograph of three students, two men and one woman, leaning over a desk and looking at a large open book. The man in the center is wearing a white polo shirt and is pointing at the book. The man on the left is wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The woman on the right has long dark hair and is wearing a yellow top with white floral patterns. They are in a room with brick walls and large windows in the background.

## Cohort Structure and Support

Cohort programs of study offered at many institutions can provide structure and support in ways that advance student progress. Pellissippi State Community College offers cohort-based programs that provide students with structured environments to promote their success. Students take courses together with a consistent set of peers, who stay with them throughout their studies. The course sequences are prearranged and students have a clear sense of their pathway when they enroll. Pellissippi State notes that the relationships formed among students often bind them together and make it more likely that they will complete their course sequences.

Students who want to enroll in a cohort-based program retain the flexibility to choose from various options, including majors and time-to-degree. For example, Pellissippi students in some associate degree programs can choose between a traditional or an accelerated pace. The Accelerated Higher Education Associate's Degree (AHEAD), has block scheduling and a common cohort experience, providing students with structure designed to increase student success.

# Strategy 3: Create Structured Pathways

A structured pathway is composed of a formalized series of courses that directs student progress throughout his or her academic program and is aligned with life goals. Such pathways, which are connected to post-college plans, help students chart their courses efficiently and motivate timely completion. Students are often challenged with an array of available courses, a shortage of time with advisers, and a course schedule that varies from one term to the next. Structure can help transform an overwhelming set of options (courses, majors, electives) into a simpler set of coherent choices. Too many choices can overwhelm students, often delaying or preventing college completion.

Students should be encouraged to develop academic pathways that lead to timely completion. Too often students take courses without any understanding of how—or whether—they fit into a plan to graduate. Students who do not have a plan often take longer than necessary to graduate and get deterred by life situations (e.g., work issues or family concerns that require taking academic leave or dropping out). Having a plan does not eliminate the “undecided major” pathway. Exploring potential disciplines is a creative experience that can inspire students to major in subject areas that they would not have previously considered. Undecided does not necessarily mean unstructured. There are ways to map a student’s journey that allow flexibility for exploration and include critical junctures when students need to make crossroad decisions.

***Pathways*** – Create structured and coherent pathways to help students navigate towards timely degree attainment.

***Holistic*** – Students and advisers should be able to easily monitor progress on an academic pathway.

***Choice*** – Allow students to shape their pathways around their unique goals and interests.

The ability to easily follow and track student progress is key to the success of a clear pathway. Whether plans are created by students themselves or developed by the colleges they attend, there should be continual attention to student advancement by both students and advisers. Developing a method for tracking progress is essential. To aid this type of planning, some institutions are investing in sophisticated technology that facilitates informed choices and accurate monitoring.

## Symposium Observations

*“Students faced with a buffet of courses are often overwhelmed by the choices. There should be intensive advising to help students choose programs, not individual courses.”*

—Stan Jones, Complete College America

### Tools to Develop Pathways and Track Progress

Institutions are creating and employing various tools to facilitate the development of student pathways and to track student progress. At Valencia College, students are encouraged to develop a plan through the college’s LifeMap tool, which focuses on the student’s academic, professional, and personal goals. It is designed to encourage students to think about these issues from the moment they first enroll and throughout their progress to graduation. There are five main stages in the student’s progress that are addressed by LifeMap:

1. college transition;
2. introduction to college;
3. progression to degree;
4. graduation transition; and
5. lifelong learning.

LifeMap provides a visual whereby students can track progress toward completing their academic plans. In addition, it helps advisers understand and support students as they advance. LifeMap is online and accessible to students and advisers at all times.



LifeMap (developed by Valencia College) helps a student plan and monitor his or her academic pathway.



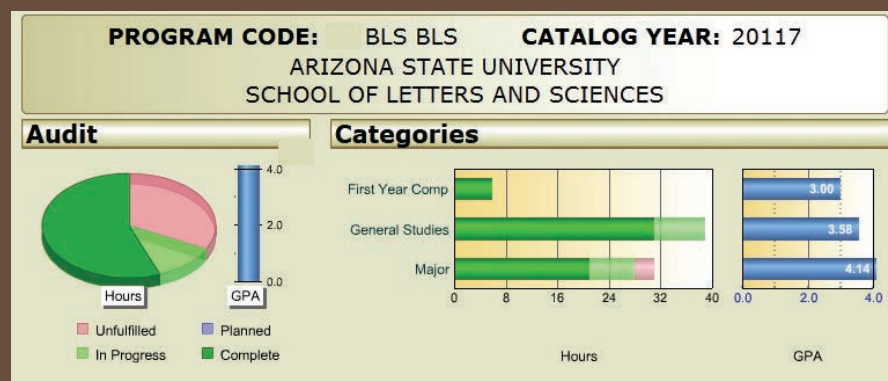
*“As institutions, we need to have structured, apparent pathways for students and help them develop the ability to advocate for themselves.”*

—Donna Linderman, ASAP Program, City University of New York

## Structure and Support

The online program at Arizona State University has a clear structure that outlines specific programs of study that students must follow. There are a limited number of majors from which to choose, and each one has a major map, which specifies the “critical courses” that must be taken early on. This ensures that a student does not get too far into a course of study before encountering obstacles that may result in a change of major. For example, a psychology student must enroll in statistics before proceeding too far academically, so if that course is an impediment to progress (e.g., gets a poor grade or becomes less motivated), it can be addressed by changing majors in a timely fashion. For students who deviate from their plans or have problems in two or more critical courses, mandatory advising is arranged.

ASU’s eAdvisor is an online system that gives students very clear information about their progress towards completing their majors. It offers tools to support the selection of an appropriate major for each student. Further, the system is designed to provide students with a deep understanding of their programs, not simply an electronic version of a course catalog. There are search functions and a degree progression tool that visually depicts a student’s progress in his or her major. The program at ASU is designed to be structured, transparent, and predictable, allowing students to make informed decisions about what their program of study should look like.



ASU’s online progress map for students, Degree Audit Reporting System (DARS), shows the progress he or she is making in fulfilling the degree requirements.



### Collaboration Among Offices

Collaboration between faculty and other campus offices, especially student affairs, is key to increasing student success. Developing and institutionalizing these relationships are critical. Working together to create integrated systems and policies that promote student success contributes to the effectiveness of campus efforts in promoting completion. Knowing the resources that are available, which are often in the student affairs division, and how best to direct students to those resources, allow faculty to play a more effective role in the student support system. In addition, advisers, coaches and mentors sometimes know that students are having academic problems before faculty members and can be effective in relaying concerns and early warnings. Encouraging frequent and ongoing collaboration between and among these units builds relationships, which lead to information sharing that can positively impact student success.

# Strategy 4: Engage and Incentivize Faculty

The significance of the faculty's role in promoting student success cannot be overstated. Faculty members interact directly with students and are key players in guiding institutional decision making and policy development. It is critical that faculty themselves recognize the significance of these responsibilities. They also need to be assured that increasing completion does not mean diluting academic rigor. Quality must be maintained and even enhanced as students are supported in their completion efforts.

A way to institutionalize and incentivize faculty engagement is to include quality teaching and student success as essential components of awarding tenure and promotion. Promotion and tenure reviews often give more weight to research. There is a growing perception that the research university tenure orientation is spreading to a much larger set of institutionally diverse four-year colleges, as Tinto (2012) notes: "Four-year institutions must address the frequently discussed conflict between teaching and research and provide incentives and rewards for being involved in faculty development efforts. Though teaching and research need not be in conflict, on many campuses they are not given equal weight, either by faculty or administration" (p. 115). Mindful of a national imperative to increase student completion, it is important for institutions to reevaluate their tenure guidelines to ensure that teaching and learning, as well as effective advising, are given appropriate weight that aligns with the mission and culture of the institution as well as promotes increased student success.

***Engage*** – Engage faculty in key roles in the development and implementation of institutional strategies and plans that support student completion.

***Incentivize*** – Reward and incentivize faculty for their quality teaching, effective advising, and attentiveness to student success.

***Collaborate*** – Encourage faculty and staff collaboration across campus units to better support student success.

Engaging students in faculty research also should be encouraged and rewarded. This takes faculty time and attentiveness, which need to be acknowledged and commended. Evidence suggests that involving students in faculty research promotes student learning and student success (Kuh et al., 2010).

Gatekeeper courses are critical decision points that drive student motivation to complete their degrees. Many faculty, however, prefer teaching upper-division courses to students who are more focused and have already declared their majors. It is extremely important that the best

teachers are assigned and rewarded for teaching the gatekeeper and developmental courses that are so important for students in their early experiences of college.

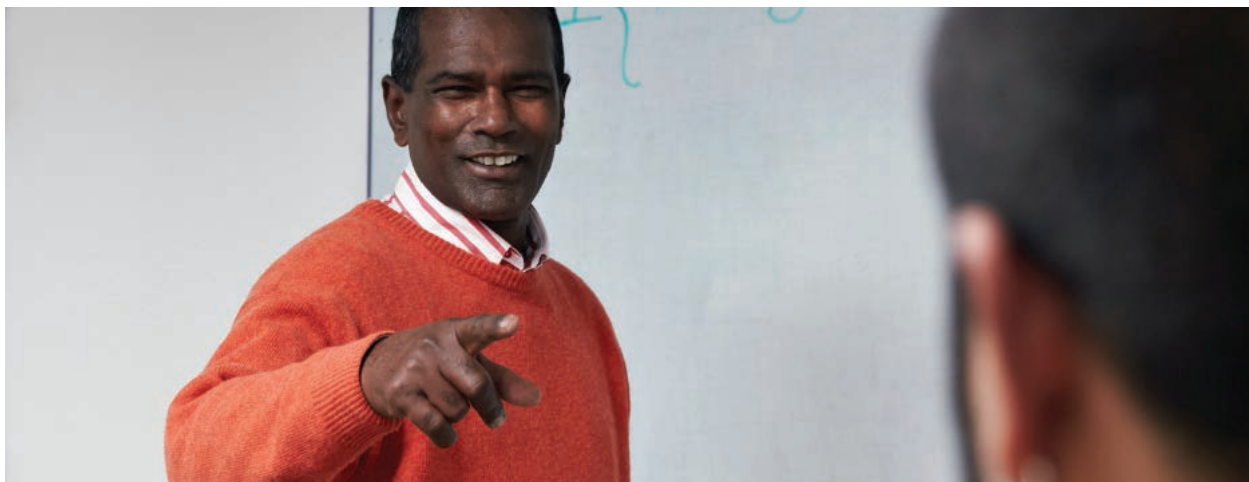


### **Engaging Faculty With First-Year Students and Incentivizing Quality Teaching**

There is a growing realization among postsecondary institutions that the first-year experience is critical in motivating and determining student progress. At Alverno College (Milwaukee) and Trinity Washington University (Washington, D.C.) experienced faculty members are selected to teach lower division and general education courses in ways that engage students from the beginning of their entrance into college. Alverno has developed a freshman seminar sequence of two courses, entitled Ways of Knowing, for students who have been identified as at risk based on a placement assessment. During the course, students are connected with library staff, business and financial aid representatives, and advising staff. A centerpiece of General Education at Trinity Washington University is the learning community, a discipline-based course in which the faculty member is also the advisor for all students in the class. Students participate in an off-campus practical experience related to the instructional objectives that is designed by the faculty member and supported with resources from the University. Both institutions report that these programs demonstrate a positive impact on retention.

At Alverno College and Trinity Washington University faculty are encouraged to have a special focus on teaching, an emphasis that is codified in criteria used for tenure and promotion. At Alverno, the criteria for teaching at the rank of associate professor are clearly articulated in the faculty handbook and include understanding developmental learning theories, flexibility in using different modes of assessment and adapting to meet individual student learning needs. Trinity rewards faculty engagement in research but also pedagogic innovation. For tenure and promotion reviews, the institution privileges the “scholarship of teaching” equally with scholarship in a specific discipline.





### **Faculty as Essential to Completion Success**

At Santa Ana College, President Erlinda Martinez has set the goal to increase the course completion rate by 10 percentage points, from 64 percent to 74 percent by 2015. The college has been designated a Hispanic Serving Institution, with almost 60 percent Latino students.

Meeting President Martinez's goal has required "all hands on deck," she notes. It has necessitated collaboration among all areas of the university, including actively engaging the faculty. While faculty are not expected to provide all services to students, they are expected to know the roles of other offices on campus and work with those offices to assist students. Santa Ana offers a professional development and mentoring seminar for new faculty members, who come to campus with deep knowledge of their subject area, but who may benefit from orientation to the broader university and its goals. In addition, the faculty senate has sought to provide professional development by embedding workshops and learning opportunities into their meetings.

Martinez also seeks to involve faculty by sharing with them data on student outcomes. For example, in January of 2012, she gave faculty members data on departmental completion rates and challenged them to increase their success rates. By involving faculty in these discussions, assuring they have data to assess the reality and monitor progress and empowering them to use their creativity to address the challenges, Martinez seeks to build a culture at Santa Ana College where all members of the campus community work together to improve student success.

The collaboration between different areas on campus has given Martinez confidence that the college can meet its goals. She cites the many ways that units come together to support students: departments collaborating with one another; student affairs and academic affairs collaborations; peer-to-peer faculty development supported by the faculty senate (in which faculty help to improve one another's teaching); and the collaborative effort to look at data across all units. As multiple participants at the Evidence-Action-Innovation Symposium noted, improving completion rates cannot happen without collaborative efforts that include faculty.



*“For us to reach President Obama’s goal of leading the world in college graduation again by 2020, we cannot continue to do business as usual. We think that the good ideas are out there with you, not with us here in Washington. I feel a huge sense of urgency, but also opportunity, as I travel the country and talk to hundreds of folks at universities, colleges, community colleges, and elsewhere. There is a huge amount of creativity and innovation going on. We hope that we can reach students at universities with what is working to eventually dramatically change the prospects for graduation for the students coming out of our institutions.”*

**—Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education**

Jan. 30, 2012, Evidence-Action-Innovation Symposium, Washington, D.C.

## Conclusion

This *Evidence Meets Practice* guide is designed to spark conversation and action among postsecondary education leaders and practitioners. The lessons shared throughout this guide rest on the fundamental underpinning identified by the participants at the Evidence-Action-Innovation symposium that major increases in completion rates require an integrated, sustained and systemic approach. Isolated programmatic efforts, no matter how well designed and implemented, do not have a lasting impact. This guide identifies four strategies for discussion and potential adoption and/or adaptation. It also encourages conversations about other strategies that work for students. Ultimately, it is meant to be a guide for discussion and, hopefully, action that leads to successful practice (see Appendix 2, “Discussion Guide”).

The strategies advanced in this *Evidence Meets Practice* guide emerged from a gathering of more than 55 leading researchers, practitioners, policy experts, and national organizations at the Evidence-Action-Innovation Symposium that the Department of Education convened on Jan.30, 2012. The overarching theme that emerged from the symposium is that long-term improvements in student success can only be attained through integrated and sustained strategies and programs that are part of a systematic plan and, ultimately, are supported by an institutional culture. The college president and other senior leaders are key to creating, sustaining, and institutionalizing such a culture.

Several participants at the symposium referenced the importance of utilizing technological resources. The use of technology is never an end in itself nor can it maximally facilitate support if a program or strategy is poorly developed. Present advances in technology can increase personalization, collaboration, productivity, and quality. Some institutions are successfully using the lab emporium model for teaching math, where students do math problems at computers during class time and are able to get assistance from their peers and instructors (Twigg, 2011). Web-based teaching and testing systems utilize videos and other interactive tools to explain concepts, as well as produce practice quizzes that can be generated on demand and graded instantaneously. Without technology, institutions will be unable to take advantage of advances in personalized learning, increased data flow to monitor student progress, and new ways of teaching and learning that include course redesign, the flipped classroom (where lectures are viewed online as an assignment and class time is dedicated to interactions between faculty and students) and MOOCs (massive open online courses), as well as digital videos, textbooks, and social ways of interacting.

This guide is designed to start and extend campus conversations. You are invited to share insights and reflections on the material presented as well as present other strategies and innovations that have evidence of success (email: [collegecompletion@ed.gov](mailto:collegecompletion@ed.gov)). In addition, you may respond to the Department's request for information, entitled "Promising and Practical Strategies to Increase Postsecondary Success" (Appendix 3, "Selected Department of Education Resources"), the results of which can be viewed at <http://www.ed.gov/college-completion>, where institutions have submitted their promising practices in advancing college completion.

In order to meet President Obama's goal that the United States once again has the most educated, best prepared workforce in the world the Department of Education is committed to harness the strengths of its present programs (see Appendix 3, "Selected Department of Education Resources") and to develop new programs to complement and reinforce them. It also will require innovative approaches to student success, since incremental increases will not result in the necessary level of change. In all of these endeavors, we look forward to working in partnership with you to meet the president's challenge to have the best-educated workforce and most effective citizenry in the world.

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# Appendix 2: Discussion Guide

Conversations at the institutional level will assist in discerning the most relevant or promising approaches for different campuses. Senior leaders and other key personnel can convene to discuss the strategies presented in this guide as well as explore other strategies that their institution can implement in each of these areas to advance student success. The questions below are intended to serve as starting points for such conversations.

## **Integrating and Sustaining Student Supports**

- How are individual support programs integrated into an overall systemic plan?
- Since research indicates that the positive impacts of support programs often dissipate without follow-up programming, how can your institution develop a systemic model that integrates support throughout a student's enrollment?
- Are there programs or initiatives on your campus that can be scaled to provide opportunities for greater numbers of students?
- What can senior leaders do to drive systemic change and empower those across campus to champion student success?
- How and to what extent is your institution's unique mission and history reflected in your student support programs and in your overall campuswide plan?

## **Strategy 1: Transform Developmental Education**

- How can developmental courses be transformed to maximize student success?
- Are there ways to accelerate student completion of developmental coursework?
- Would upward placement work as an effective strategy on your campus?
- What approaches are used or can be used for students who are enrolled in developmental courses to promote their sense of being “authentic” college students?

## **Strategy 2: Bring Advising to the Student**

- In what ways could the current advising system be improved to meet the academic, personal, and professional needs of more students?
- Would a more proactive approach to advising better support your students?
- How can and/or should technology be used to increase mentoring opportunities on and off campus?
- How can you better predict student advising needs using available data and other indicators?

## **Strategy 3: Create Structured Pathways**

- Does your institution establish clear pathways to degree completion for all students?
- What flexibilities exist for a student to create an individual pathway that varies from the institution's established path?
- Can students and advisers easily track student progress along these pathways?
- What interventions exist for students who are not progressing in a timely way to completion (e.g. number and type of credits earned by target date)?

## **Strategy 4: Engage and Incentivize Faculty**

- What is the role of faculty in the student success and completion effort?
- What efforts are made to match faculty with course assignments in ways that maximize student success?
- Does your institution reward faculty members who make exceptional contributions to student engagement and success? If so, how?
- Can you better connect faculty members who have consistent interaction with students and understanding of their realities with information regarding campus support systems that can help students manage concerns and difficult issues?

# Appendix 3: Selected Department of Education Resources

The Department of Education offers many resources in addition to this guide that help institutions better understand and address the challenges of improving college completion, including grant opportunities to fund promising programs and research and data that evaluate and monitor practices and institutional progress. Below are some of the Department of Education's grant programs, research and statistics offices, White House initiatives as well as websites and publications that inform completion efforts.

## Office of Postsecondary Education Grant Programs

**Student Support Services** program competitively awards funds to institutions of higher education to provide opportunities for academic development, assist students with basic college requirements, and motivate students toward the successful completion of their postsecondary education. Activities include academic tutoring, assistance with course selection and financial aid applications, mentoring, financial literacy education, and individualized personal, academic, and career counseling.

*Website: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/triostudsupp/index.html>*

**Strengthening Institutions Program** helps eligible institutions become self-sufficient and expand their capacity to serve low-income students by providing competitive funds to improve and strengthen the academic quality, institutional management, and fiscal stability of eligible institutions. Activities may include student service programs intended to improve academic success, such as innovative, customized, instruction courses designed to help retain and advance students rapidly into core courses that may include developmental education and English language instruction, and through program completion.

*Website: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/iduestitle3a/index.html>*



**Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE)—Comprehensive Program** supports innovative reform projects that promise to be models for improving the quality of postsecondary education and increasing student access. Competitively funded projects have included the development of road maps that help students identify degree and certificate programs and use prior learning assessments to accelerate postsecondary attainment, implementation of innovative advising practices, creation of a mentoring program for low-income Hispanic students, and rethinking approaches to developmental education.

*Website: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/fipsecomp/index.html>*

**FIPSE—Centers of Excellence for Veteran Student Success** supports postsecondary education programs that provide coordinated services to address the academic, financial, physical, and social needs of veteran students. Activities performed by Veteran Student Success Centers have included establishing an on-campus center and veterans support team; monitoring the rates of veteran student enrollment, persistence, and completion; creating supportive instructional services, such as counseling and tutoring; and assisting in obtaining financial aid, housing support, and programs to ease the transition to campus life for veteran students.

*Website: <http://www.ed.gov/programs/cevss/index.html>*

## **Research and Statistics**

**National Center for Education Statistics** provides information about institutions, including data relevant to completion.

*Website: <http://nces.ed.gov>*

**Institute of Education Sciences** provides rigorous and relevant evidence on which to ground education practice and policy and shares this information broadly. IES is the research arm of the Department of Education.

*Website: <http://ies.ed.gov>*

## White House Initiatives

**White House Initiatives** conduct targeted outreach and provide technical assistance to support student success within communities that are critical to increasing completion rates across the nation.

- White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders
- White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics
- White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities
- White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education
- White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans
- White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships

*Website: <http://www.ed.gov/about/inits/list/index.html>*

## Request for Information

**Request for Information**, entitled “Promising and Practical Strategies to Increase Postsecondary Success,” requests submissions from institutions, states, systems of higher education, adult education providers, researchers, and other nonprofit organizations regarding promising and practical strategies, practices, programs and activities that contribute to increased rates of postsecondary success. The results of the first round of submissions received by April 30, 2012 can be viewed at <http://www.ed.gov/college-completion>. The *Federal Register* Second Notice Request for Information was published on Sept. 12, 2012. The review of the second round submissions will include those received by Nov. 30, 2012. For more information contact Frederick Winter ([frederick.winter@ed.gov](mailto:frederick.winter@ed.gov)).

*Website: <https://federalregister.gov/a/2012-22509>*





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